Ontario’s Leadership Framework
A Tool For Equity Leadership

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In December 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Education issued a ‘mini discussion paper’ outlining a series of “new supports for principals and vice-principals in Ontario publicly funded schools”. One of the five goals outlined in the discussion paper was, “Better define the role, powers, responsibilities and obligations of principals and vice-principals to ensure coherent and consistent expectations.” In 2006, the Ministry of Education introduced The Ontario Leadership Strategy. The Strategy is comprised of a four-point action plan that includes: a Leadership Framework, leadership development activities that are aligned with the Framework, support mechanisms for school leaders, and an Institute for Education Leadership.

This article outlines how the Leadership Framework supports equity leadership. The Framework is a detailed and thorough presentation of what the province believes educational leadership should look like in Ontario schools. Through a brief consideration of selected equity literature it is possible to identify a number of the themes of an ‘equity agenda’. In this way, the Framework can be seen as promoting an agenda for equity that addresses the greater good of all students in Ontario schools.

Educational administration has traditionally had a strong managerial orientation. If educational leaders truly wish to educate all children, an equity orientation needs to inform our practice. Because of this a tension exists for educational administrators between the demands of managerialism and the demands of an equity agenda which focuses on student achievement and student success. The Leadership Framework – the provincial direction for leadership – guides us to lead for equity.

The broad themes in equity literature provide the key elements of an agenda for equity leadership. Perspectives vary depending on the authors to whom one refers and the arguments they present in their work. From the literature, it is apparent that there is
no single equity perspective. The perspectives range from the macro - broad societal restructuring – to the micro - the individual classroom and the individual student.

Inasmuch as this may seem problematic, there are broad themes that cut across the literature. These themes can be identified as:

1. participation (including community involvement)
2. the achievement and success of all students
3. inclusion and exclusion
4. on-going professional learning
5. accountability
6. equity of outcomes
7. diversity.

**Analysis of the Leadership Framework**

The seven broad equity themes in the literature are threaded throughout the Leadership Framework. In this way they can be seen as serving as the equity agenda within the Framework.

**Participation**

One of the most common leadership themes addressed by the authors in the literature was that of participation. Anderson (1998) speaks most powerfully about ‘authentic participation’. He states,

“There is a wealth of literature that argues for structures of participation in schools that guarantee not only the inclusion of diverse stakeholders but also the conditions that allow those stakeholders, once they are at the table, to have a significant impact on decision making.”

Within the body of literature a number of interconnected conditions emerge that are related to participation. These conditions include the need for structures of participation, decision-making, collaboration, and the inclusion of a variety of stakeholders. The Leadership Framework addresses participation in all five of the
‘Leader Competencies and Practices’. Specific references can be found within the ‘Practices, Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes’.

The Framework calls for the inclusion of a variety of stakeholders within both the school and community to build a shared vision, a shared culture and mutually-agreed-upon objectives so that everyone is working in the best interests of all students. Collaborative cultures are identified as necessary in order to connect the school to its wider community so that effective partnerships can be built. Authentic participation and inclusion are explicitly stated in the Framework with the intent to engage the school council and the broader school community, as well as encouraging broader parent involvement with the school.

**The achievement and success of all students**

It may safely be assumed that the ultimate goal behind equity-minded school leadership would be to deliver the best education to every student in every school.

Karpinski and Lugg (2006) are explicit about equity leadership and its link to the education of all students. They define equity for schools as,

“…pursuing policies, practices, and politics that enhance the lifetime opportunities for all children, particularly those children who have been historically marginalized”.

The Leadership Framework addresses the importance of the achievement and success of all students in all five of the ‘Leader Competencies and Practices’. The ‘Practices, Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes’ of the Framework identify as paramount the importance of believing that all students can learn. It highlights the significance of setting high expectations for all students, not just those who traditionally have achieved well. School leaders are seen as ensuring a consistent and continuous school-wide focus on student achievement that empowers all participants to work in the best interests of all
students. Furthermore, school leaders and partners are expected to demonstrate a commitment to closing the achievement gap for all students through meeting the needs of all students in diverse ways. Indeed, school leaders are identified as needing to promote collective responsibility for student learning within the whole school community.

**Inclusion and exclusion**

For our purposes here, the term ‘inclusion’ focuses on the sense of ‘being included’. It is not possible to discuss inclusion without addressing its counterpart – exclusion.

Theoharis (2007) speaks to the issue of the exclusion of students within school. He states that, “leadership that is not focused on and successful at creating more just and equitable schools for marginalized students is indeed not good leadership.” McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) state that “strong, focused, insightful, skilled leadership” must, among other things, confront “what practices include and exclude students…”

The Leadership Framework addresses inclusion and exclusion in all five of the ‘Leader Competencies and Practices’. The introductory comments in the Framework make explicit the intention for it to be a tool for inclusion.

“The competencies and practices in the Framework describe leadership broadly in a way that is intended to be inclusive of the diversity found in school communities across the province.”

More specifically, the Framework addresses inclusion through the process of building collaborative cultures. This is accomplished by using strategies that ensure inclusion, diversity, and access so that participation in school and school life can be both active and authentic. School leaders are expected to create a shared and collaborative culture where a common vision is set and common goals determined so that all participants are working for the same purposes. The Framework sees these processes as
nested within genuine and trusting relationships that are guided by the inclusion of a diversity of voices and a sense of mutual respect.

**On-going professional learning**

As much as the equity literature advocates for educators to advance an agenda for equity, it also advocates for on-going professional learning in order to learn how to do so. Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) present a framework that sees professional learning as building critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills through the lenses of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Theoharis (2007) captures in simple and accessible language the importance of on-going professional learning. He states,

“The…strategy these principals used to improve student achievement and create more just schools involved strengthening their schools’ staff. In other words, the principals resisted the assumptions that typical teacher education or staff development programs were adequate preparation in substantiating an equity orientation and practices for educators. They sought to increase staff capacity by addressing issues of race, providing ongoing staff development focused on building equity, developing staff investment in equity, hiring and supervising for justice, and empowering staff.”

In the Leadership Framework leaders are expected to build collaborative learning communities within their schools that challenge the thinking of the staff in their professional learning. Within a school culture that promotes collaborative learning communities professional learning consistently includes issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and broad participation.

**Accountability**

The term ‘accountability’ is used with alarming frequency in current educational discourse. The term has developed connotations that seem to be positive for some and negative for others. The Webster’s Dictionary defines accountability as “Responsibility
to someone or for some activity”. The Leadership Framework of refers to accountability in the following way,

“The principal is accountable to students, parents, the community, supervisors and to the board for ensuring that students benefit from a high quality education and for promoting collective responsibility for student outcomes within the whole school community.”

The Leadership Framework addresses accountability in all of the ‘Leader Competencies and Practices’. Accountability is seen as promoting collective responsibility for student achievement and student success within the whole school community. It is presented not as a focus on testing scores but a focus on high expectations for all students and a commitment to closing the achievement gap, not the testing gap. Accountability is identified as working within the school community to set mutually-agreed-upon objectives which promote and sustain school improvement and from there, collectively developing a school ethos which promotes shared knowledge and shared responsibility for outcomes. Significantly, these processes are seen to be facilitated by leaders through affirming and empowering others to work in the best interests of all students and through listening to and acting upon community feedback.

**Equity of Outcomes**

Theoharis (2007) is specific about equity in his statement that “leadership that is not focused on and successful at creating more just and equitable schools for marginalized students is indeed not good leadership”.

The ‘Practices, Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes’ from the Framework are explicit and comprehensive about equity. School leaders are seen to be effective if they demonstrate that they hold the fundamental belief that all students are capable of learning. Beyond this belief though, leaders are also expected to demonstrate a commitment to an inclusive, respectful, and equitable school culture. There is an expectation that everyone – students, families, staff, and community – are treated fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect. Furthermore, leaders are required to foster anti-
discriminatory principles and practices as well as upholding fundamental human rights.

School leaders are expected to provide equity of access to opportunity, achievement, and success for all students in their schools. In order to do so, there is a need to demonstrate a commitment to closing the achievement gap through strategies that embrace inclusion, diversity, and access for all.

Both holding and acting on beliefs is seen as fundamental. School leaders need to demonstrate their belief in meeting the needs of all students in diverse ways as well as the belief that education develops, promotes, and sustains a fair and equitable society. But beyond simply holding these beliefs, the Framework indicates that leaders are expected to take action on them.

**Diversity**

In his book on inclusive leadership, Ryan (2006) highlights and addresses a broad range of social diversities through the lens of exclusion and the concomitant damage done to individuals. Anderson (1998) calls “for structures of participation in schools that guarantee not only the inclusion of diverse stakeholders but also the conditions that allow those stakeholders, once they are at the table, to have a significant effect on decision making”.

The Provincial Framework is explicit in addressing diversity. It is identified in all five of the ‘Leader Competencies and Practices’ both in the sense of fostering diversity within schools and valuing the richness that diversity brings to the school community. The introductory comments for the Framework identify diversity as a key principle.

“The competencies and practices in the Framework describe leadership broadly in a way that is intended to be inclusive of the diversity found in school communities across the province.”

Fortunately, the Framework does not limit diversity simply to racial or ethnic diversities. With no qualifying limits placed on the term, it is likely safe to see diversity as including the full range of social diversities as addressed by Ryan (2006) in his writings on inclusion.

Within the ‘Practices, Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes’ of the Framework,
school leaders are expected to demonstrate their recognition and valuing of the richness of the diversity within their school community. This happens by ensuring that planning in the school takes into account the full diversity, values, and experiences of the members of the school and school community. Beyond recognizing and valuing diversity, leaders are expected to know about and act on strategies that ensure the inclusion of all diversities within their schools and school communities. This occurs by ensuring that full inclusion, authentic participation, ready access, achievement, and success are available to all both within the school and the broader community.

**Conclusion**

In the Leadership Framework, the Ministry of Education has provided clear and specific direction for school leadership for years to come. The direction eschews a traditional managerial focus in favour of an equity focus in the interests of the achievement and success of all Ontario students. The Framework is a tool for equity as outlined in the equity literature. It clearly and specifically addresses each of the equity themes in the ‘Practices, Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes’ of the five ‘Leader Competencies and Practices’. From this analysis it is clear that the Leadership Framework is embedded with the key themes of equity.

School leaders can – and indeed are expected to – demonstrate practices, skills, knowledge, and attitudes that move forward the themes of participation (including community involvement), the achievement and success of all students, inclusion and exclusion, on-going professional learning, accountability, equity of outcomes, and diversity.

Knowing that equity is embedded in the Framework, the following quotation from the introductory comments reveals how school leaders can use it for the greater good of all Ontario students:

“The Framework could be used in a variety of ways including stimulating discussion among leaders about what good leadership looks like, guiding the design of leadership development training for leaders in boards and in the ministry, and assisting leaders to identify areas of growth and
development they would like to pursue.

The Framework…provides a framework for growth, a framework which is sufficiently detailed to make clear what good leadership looks like, but general enough to allow for its application in different contexts.”

REFERENCES


http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/framework.html
